

Kentucky Duck Hunter Preferences for Duck Season Structure and Timing

Background

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) sets duck season parameters through a set of frameworks which states may establish their respective seasons. These parameters identify season length, bag limits, earliest opening date, latest closing date, number of zones, or season segments (splits) that states may use to set their respective duck seasons. In effort to better assess the impact duck seasons may have on harvest, the USFWS only allows states to make changes to their zones and/or splits on five-year intervals. The 2012-13 hunting season is an open period for states to make season structure changes to the following 5 seasons, if they so desire.

KDFWR received a request at some 2011-2012 town hall meetings to change Kentucky's current two-segment duck season to a three-segment season and schedule the additional segment in late October or early November. While exploring this season option, KDFWR heard from other waterfowl hunters who did not support changing the season and preferred to keep it in its current format. In an effort to ascertain the proportion of hunters who support a three-segment season and those who do not, KDFWR developed a mail survey to help identify season elements that hunters preferred.

2012 Waterfowl Hunter Survey

In March 2012, KDFWR mailed survey questionnaires to 2,004 randomly selected waterfowl hunters. Hunters were selected from a list of over 15,000 Kentucky waterfowl permit holders whose names were submitted to the US Fish and Wildlife Service's Harvest Information Program (HIP). To date, 501 surveys have been returned, for a response rate of 25%. About 71% of the survey respondents hunted waterfowl during the 2011-12 hunting season. The survey covered a variety of topics but for purposes of this report we will only summarize results from Section 3, which addressed season structure and opening day preference.

First, hunters were asked to identify that period during the season they most preferred to hunt ducks. We separated the season into 9 intervals beginning with the Thanksgiving holidays and then continuing by week through the end of the framework in late January. Three time periods accounted for over 55% of the hunter preference (Figure 1). Hunters preferred to hunt the last week of January (23%) than any other period, followed by the fourth week of December (18%) and then the Thanksgiving holidays (14%).

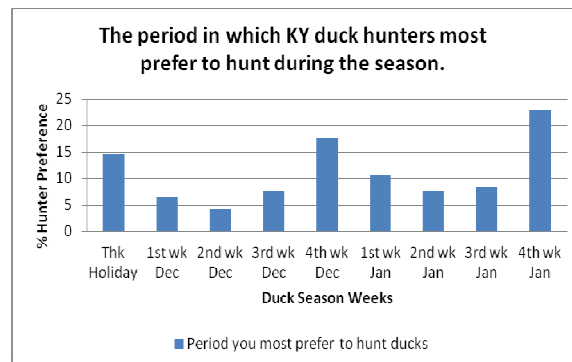


Figure 1. Duck hunter preferences among duck season periods.

Next, KDFWR identified three hunting season options permitted under the USFWS duck season frameworks and asked hunters which of the three options they preferred. If hunters had no preference they could select “no opinion” on the survey form. The season options were:

Option 1: A statewide continuous season with no splits.

Option 2: A statewide season with two season segments.

Option 3: A statewide season with three season segments.

Examining results on a statewide basis, 43% of hunters preferred a continuous season and about one-third (32%) preferred the current two-segment season. Only 10% of the hunters preferred a season with three-segments.

Respondents who duck hunted primarily in the Eastern Duck Zone more strongly supported a continuous season (Figure 2). However, hunters in the Western Duck Zone were more evenly split in their preferences, with only a 3% difference between the first two options.

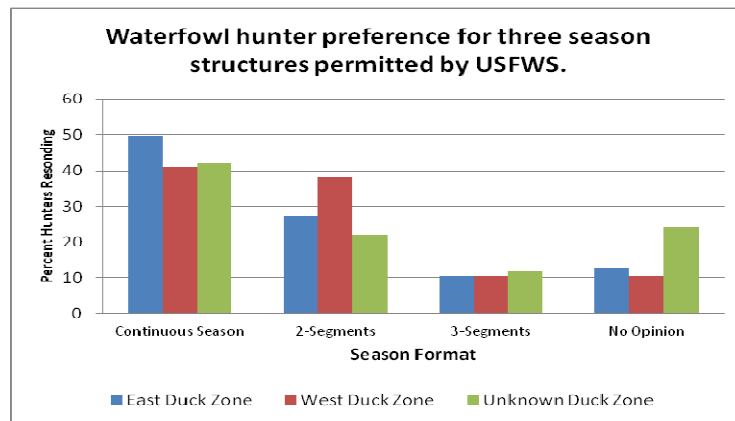


Figure 2. Duck hunter preferences among duck season structure options.

The survey next asked hunters when they would like to see the different segments of the duck season start. After hunters selected a season option they were directed to a question with a set of time periods for starting the season and asked to identify which time period(s) they would prefer to open a season segment. When we examined preferred opening date without regard to the season option selected by hunters, we found Thanksgiving period was the most preferred (42%) option among duck hunters. The second most preferred opening was the 1st week in December (23%) and some (17%) preferred an opener as late as the 2nd week in December. The 4th weekend in October and remaining weekends in November were least preferred and comprised 18% for all those periods combined.

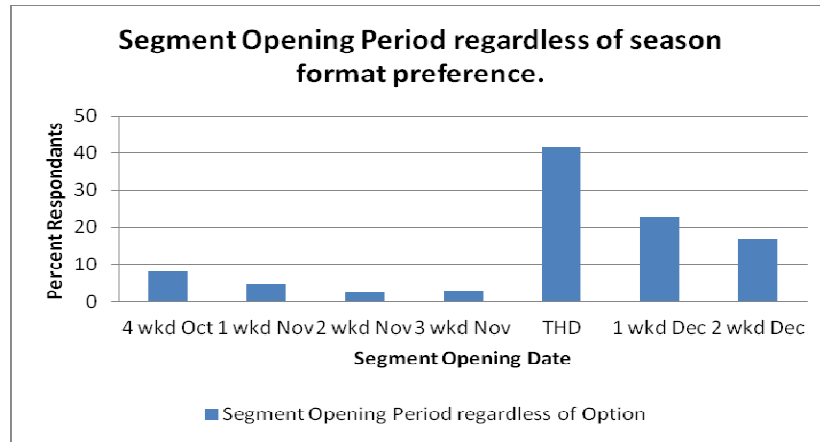


Figure 3. Duck hunter preferences among opening of duck season (without regard to preferred season option).

If season options are factored in as shown in Figure 4, we find the Thanksgiving day segment was once again preferred most for the opening of duck season by hunters who selected Options 1 or 2, and second most among hunters selecting option 3.

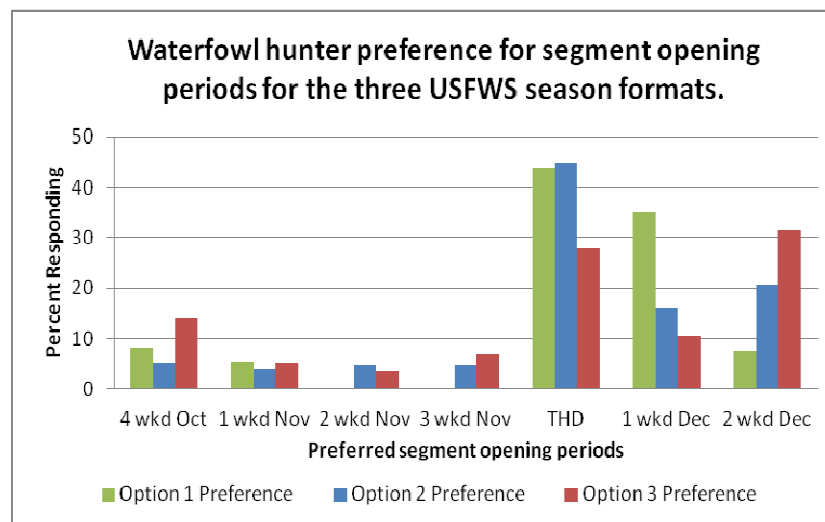


Figure 4. Duck hunter preferences among opening periods based on season option preference.

Summary & Wildlife Division Recommendation

What does this mean? At first glance it appears that most duck hunters would prefer a continuous season that would begin on Thanksgiving Day. However, if we look at all the data in more depth we find that there is more to meeting hunters' desires than just implementing a 60-day continuous season that opens on Thanksgiving Day. Although the survey indicates many hunters want the season to start during the Thanksgiving holidays, many of them also want to hunt as late in the season as the framework permits.

Nearly a fourth of duck hunters prefer to hunt during the last week of the season more than any other segment. If KDFWR set a continuous season framework which opened on Thanksgiving Day, the season would end the third week of January, fully one week prior to the beginning of that period preferred by the largest percentage of Kentucky duck hunters.

To better satisfy hunter desires it may be necessary to blend different season aspects together. While a continuous season may be preferred by many hunters, their preference can be partially met by the long continuous segment (56 days) that is provided for under the current format. Again, the opportunity to hunt during the Thanksgiving holiday is another strong preference identified by hunters in this survey. The short, four-day season segment currently offered also meets this desire. Finally, the current season format allows duck hunters to be in the field during those periods preferred most by the state's duck hunters. Given the information provided by a random sample of duck hunters in this survey, it appears that the current two-segment format best addresses the preferences of the greatest proportion of Kentucky's duck hunters at this time.

Youth Waterfowl Weekend

The USFWS established a special youth waterfowl hunting day beginning with the 1996-97 hunting season. In an effort to maximize youth opportunity, KDFWR scheduled its youth waterfowl hunting day for the second weekend in October prior to the closure period of the waterfowl refuge areas on KDFWR WMAs. In 1999, after input from hunting clubs in the Ballard Reporting Zone, the date was moved to later—to the first Saturday after the duck season closed. However, snow and subfreezing weather limited youth participation that year and hunters outside the western Kentucky region requested the youth season to once again be scheduled prior to the regular season.

Beginning with the 2000 waterfowl season the USFWS expanded youth opportunity to two consecutive days and allowed states with duck zones to set different seasons in each zone. In an effort to meet hunter desires for early and late youth seasons, KDFWR set its youth days by zones, with dates set prior to duck season in the Eastern Zone and after duck season in the Western Zone. This season structure remains in use today.

In 2008, KDFWR collected hunter opinions through a web survey (nonrandom, online public input). One question asked of hunters was when KDFWR should set youth waterfowl days. Hunter comments collected from that web survey revealed that a majority of participating hunters supported the KDFWR's split youth waterfowl season structure. Support was greatest in the Eastern Duck Zone where 54% of participating hunters preferred the youth weekend to be held prior to the duck season. KDFWR asked similar questions in the current, randomized survey. Results from this most recent survey were virtually the same as the 2008 online public input survey results (Figure 1). About 56% of hunters responding to this mail survey primarily hunted in the Eastern Duck Zone; they preferred the youth weekend continue to be set prior to the regular season.

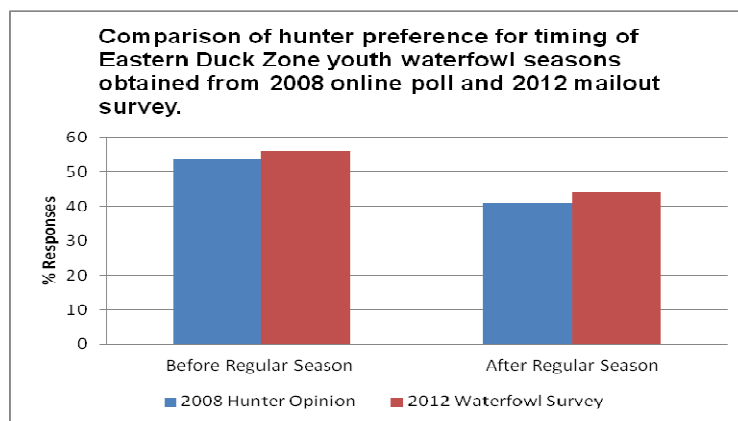


Figure 1. Comparison of 2008 and 2012 hunter opinion data from the Eastern Duck Zone regarding scheduling of youth waterfowl hunting season

Based on hunter input collected from the 2012 survey, KDFWR recommends no change in youth season structure at this time.